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Article: **Digital Platform and HR Professionals: A Review Paper**

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Digital Platform and HR Professionals: A Review Paper

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Abstract

Technological changes have transformed the way organizations used to operate. The gig economy and digital labor have made it easier for employers to find cheap labor; it becomes essential to understand how this might influence workers' livelihoods. This employment relationship between an employee (gig worker) and the employer has reduced the bargaining power of a digital worker (contractual employee) and left them at the mercy of the employer or digital labor platform. This paper aims to identify that the traditional role of HR is no longer viable. After finalizing an initial list of search words, a literature review was carried out to achieve the study objective. Search terms include 'digitalization', 'gig worker', 'digital worker', 'online digital platform'. The researchers independently reviewed the titles and abstracts of all the identified articles and critically examined the article information. Hence, in the light of the HR Role Model and Technology Acceptance Model, it is proposed that HR needs to take the initiative as a strategic business partner, understand their role as a change agent and develop technological expertise. Future researchers are invited to explore HR attitudes and behavior towards technology acceptance and their ability to adapt and accept the gig economy. The practical implication of this study is to help HR in formulating new policies and procedures to act as an employee advocate and ensure that the digital platform would not exploit employees by realizing their potential as HR personnel.

Keywords: digitization, online digital platform, gig worker, HR role, technology acceptance model

Introduction

Digitization is "the way many domains of social life are restructured around digital communication and media infrastructures" (Brennen & Kreiss, 2016). It refers to continuous change and transformation in organizations'

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manual and routine work (Gallego & Kurer, 2022; Waschull et al., 2022). Technological development promotes the formulation of new organization structuring, such as project-based organizations, which consist of a problem-solving approach (Bredin & Söderlund, 2011). This type of organization encourages the establishment of e-lancing or an online platform that hires short-term independent freelance as contractual employe (Kuhn, 2016; Waschull et al., 2022). It allows organizations to form a new structure, such as a virtual workplace or virtual organization (Hertel et al., 2005) also known as digital platforms (Harris, 2017). The advent of online labor platforms raises novel questions about employer-worker relations and organizational structuring.

Human resources (HR) face a number of issues when dealing with projects-based organizations, which differ from traditional companies that follow a permanent employment method (Duggan et al., 2021). Moreover, (Bredin & Söderlund, 2011)) added that "a number of empirical investigations have indicated that project forms of organizing trigger a higher degree of contracting." It questions how HR performs its recruitment, compensation, and performance evaluation activities. The project-based work suggests that people are hired on temporary contracts. The prominent feature of such an organization or workplace is that a new employment relationship exists between employer and employee (Lehdonvirta, 2016). Thus, it is difficult to assess their performance and encourage them (Bredin & Söderlund, 2011). The underlying cause of this limitation is that HR practices and roles are traditionally developed for permanent employees rather than project base employees (Stulgienė & Čiutienė, 2012).

There is a lack in the literature that addresses this issue. Human resource management (HRM) must begin to recognize the gig economy because it creates several problems related to job security, training, compensation, and the working relationship between gig employees (McDonnell et al., 2018). After all, the management of digital labor is different from traditional workforce management (Hertel et al., 2005). For instance, during the hiring process via an online digital platform, there is little and no involvement of any HR professionals, clients, or consumers to evaluate the applicant's online profile and review their previous rating. Usually, no interview is conducted; only online communication using internet tools determines

application suitability (David, 2001). It highlights the different mechanisms between the employer and employee hiring decision (Meijerink, Boons, Keegan & Marler, 2018). Moreover, little literature has discussed HR practices from an e-Lancing perceptive (Aguinis & Lawal, 2013). (Similarly, Meijerink (2020) has also invited HR researchers to discuss the competency and role of an HR professional in the era of digitalization.

In light of this premise, this study aimed to highlight that the traditional role of an HR professional is no longer viable in the era of digitalization because now employers hire gig workers for a particular project without taking responsibility. Using a technology acceptance model, this study recommended future researchers to investigate and explore HR attitude and behavior towards the acceptance of the gig economy and develop competencies according to the need of time. Therefore, this will attempt to discuss the role an HR professional can perform in the digital era and what competencies might be required to play a specific part by keeping TAM and Ulrich's HR role model. It is also significant for organizations, as Sekhar et al. (2016) discussed that a dynamic company environment influences performance. Consequently, Sekhar et al. (2016) argued the role of HR in an organization's flexibility that "HR flexibility as a form of strategic flexibility helps a firm to preserve and develop its competitive advantage."

Literature Review

Digital Platform and Gig Worker

The digital platforms facilitate a digital worker to connect with consumers and clients (Harris, 2017). The definition of an online platform by the European Commission is based on the fact that it uses the Internet to facilitate interactions between two or more distinct but interdependent groups of users to generate value for at least one of the user groups (Demary, 2015). For example, e-lancing organizes work using online marketplaces, where specific tasks are offered to different persons. It is a platform "in which freelancers get in touch with clients via the internet, work as teleworkers, and transfer work results via ICT networks" (Gareis, 2002). Besides the fact, it assists people to find work while staying at home, such as around 1.5 million freelancers in the UK (Kitching & Smallbone, 2012).

Upwork is one of many e-lancing sites. Gig workers (digital workers) from around the world can be hired to execute specialized jobs, such as website design and data entry, for different organizations and businesses. Individuals who work as "gig workers" or "digital workers" do so from the comfort of their own home or office. Their work tends to be more imaginative (Whiting et al., 2015). The payment is generally paid on an hourly or piecework basis. The work schedule of these workers is irregular because it depends upon the demands of the services they render, and most workers perform their tasks from their homes (Stewart & Stanford, 2017). They are also called independent contractors (Wood et al., 2016). The volume of this industry has increased over the year. By 2021, 163 million freelancer profiles have been created on online labor marketplaces around the world. 19 million people have used the platform at least once, while 5 million have completed at least 10 projects or earned at least $1000. According to these figures, the number of workers registered has grown significantly since 2015 (Kässi et al., 2021).

We define a full-time job as workers who have earned more than $1000 or completed more than ten tasks in the course of their employment. After accounting for multiple-housing, these figures drop to 7.7 million and 1.8 million, respectively. Finally, these figures rise to 9.3 million and 2.2 million when multiple workers are taken into account (Kässi et al., 2021).

The digital platforms have been classified in different dimensions. For instance, a task-oriented classification distinguishes between a platform that allows buyer and seller to connect a platform that will enable analysis and assists the workers to get paid for allocated tasks (Productivity commission, 2016). De Stefano (2015) has also categorized online labor platforms that involve obtaining and delivering a job or task online. Secondly, the jobs are organized online, but it is performed in a real-life setting that consequently changes the employment relationship (De Stefano, 2015) (Boons et al., 2015; Nakatsu et al., 2014) and interaction is now more in a virtual setting. This change in the relationship between employer and employee has also made HR ponder their roles and competencies in the project-oriented organization.

Ulrich HR Role Model

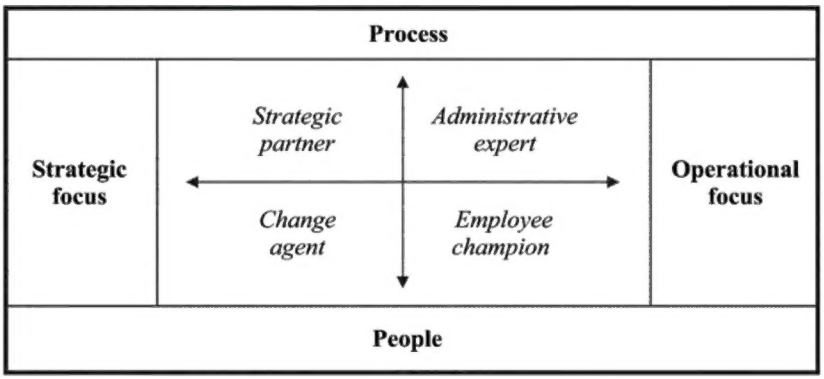
The role of HR has been defined by Ulrich (1996) to facilitate HR in performing their task more effectively, such as "strategic partner, change

agent, employee champion, and administrative expert." A strategic partner, HR must ensure that business and HR strategies are aligned. They should be able to identify the HR practices that support the company's business plan. Furthermore, during this process, the increasing importance of the strategic function of HR has started to decrease the other functions' value (Ulrich, 1996). As a change agent, HR must endeavor to improve and modify the organization's operational processes.

Additionally, it argues that HR professionals need to act as change agents to help employees let go of old ways and adopt new changes. This role covers responsibilities like identifying the problem, building a trustworthy relationship, and solving problems by developing action plans (Ulrich, 1996).

Figure 1

Ulrich Model



Source: Ulrich (1997)

The third role is of employee champion that ensures that employee needs are met by encouraging managers to spend time with their employees. They inspire employees to be more committed (Ulrich, 1996). The last role is of administrative expert; it is traditionally one of the essential activities of HR. It covers recruitment, selection, training, compensation, benefits, reward, and promotion. To achieve administrative goals, HR needs to be effective and efficient. This role requires an HR professional to be cost-effective and adds value to the business (Ulrich, 1996).

However, digitalization and technological changes demand changes in HR roles and functions. The difference in a part can only be effectively managed by any individual when relevant competencies are either available or developed. Regarding HR competencies, Ulrich et al. (1995) explain that HR professionals "demonstrate competence when they add value to their business." It supports organizations in taking steps that would be valuable for the business (Ulrich et al., 1995). The traditional HR professionals focus on employer and employee relations from a long-term perspective.

However, a study conducted by Bell et al. (2006a) highlighted that HR professionals add value to organizations; the strategic role of HR professionals assists an organization in developing competencies that help HR attain successful work outcomes. Moreover, HR competency reflects its competence in performing HR functions, "the extent to which an HR professional delivers high-quality HR practices" (Ulrich et al., 1989). In other words, it infers that HR professionals should be an expert in HR functions.

The history of HR practices discusses a shift in the traditional practice of HR and the emergence of new employee-related techniques. Previously, for HR professionals, the primary focus was the monetary side of employee motivation. A change can be observed; HR opts for an advisory role (Vosburgh, 2007). Moreover, HR is now in the phase of integration of HR with business issues (Bondarouk et al., 2014). It has been argued by Ulrich (1996) and his colleagues (Ulrich et al., 1989) that HR professionals require to develop new competencies to manage their new tasks and responsibility successfully. Additionally, create a framework for HR professionals (Ulrich et al., 1989; Ulrich et al., 1995) because HR tasks are rapidly transforming in the wake of digitalization. Consequently, technology should be part of it (Al-Mutawa & Manuel, 2022; Kuchciak & Warwas, 2021; Schoonover, 2003).

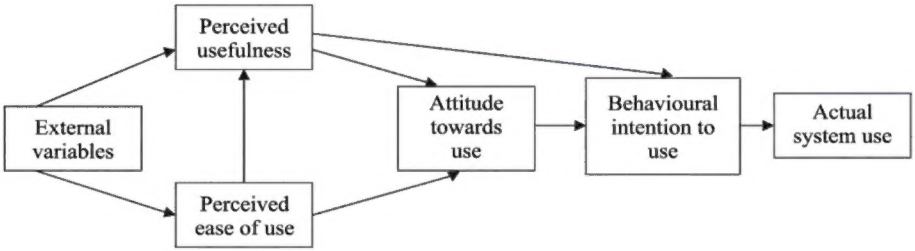
Technology Acceptance Model

In academia, the technology acceptance model (TAM) is a well-known theoretical framework for describing the factors influencing the user's acceptance of information technology (Kabir et al., 2022; Usman et al., 2022). In the domain of HRM, the TAM model assist in better

understanding individual acceptance towards information technology, use, and adoption (Parvez et al., 2022; Sharma & Ahmad, 2022). Figure 1 is an adaptation of the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA). Ajzen and Fishbein (1975) specifically tailored to the IT contexts (Venkatesh et al., 2003). The objective of TAM is to describe user acceptance and use of IT (Davis et al., 1989; Voermans & van Veldhoven, 2007). TAM has been extensively used to foresee the acceptance and use of IT in organizations (Davis et al., 1989). IS researchers usually consider TAM one of the most significant theories (King & He, 2006; Lee et al., 2003; Legris et al., 2003).

Figure 2

Technology Acceptance Model



Source: Davis (1989)

PEOU discusses "the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would be free from the effort" (Davis et al., 1989). PU states "the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would enhance his or her job performance" (Davis et al., 1989).

Research Methodology

The current study describes the online digital platform and gig workers while highlighting the employment relationship between them, and gig workers have limited to no bargaining power. Secondly, in the light of TAM and Ulrich's HR role model, the author emphasized that HR should play its part in organizations that hire gig workers for short-term or long-term projects. It is imperative because of two reasons the organizations worldwide are changing their business model and starting to outsource their work to gig workers. Secondly, the traditional HR approach is no longer valuable to employers and employees. The authors comprehensively

searched for relevant journals such as Human Resource Management Review, International Journal of Human Resource Management, Issues in Information Systems, Industrial and Organizational Psychology, International journal of information systems and project management, Communications of the Association for Information Systems, and Personnel Review. The primary information source was a database search on Web of Science and Google Scholar. To find the articles, an initial list of search words was generated. Search terms include 'digitalization', 'gig worker', 'digital worker', 'online digital platform'.

Researchers independently reviewed the titles and abstracts of all the identified articles. We critically examined the article information for relevance to the literature review by asking the following questions when reading each article: 'does the article report on 'digital platform' and 'what is the likely impact of the digital platform on gig worker' and 'what role HR personnel can play.

Results and Discussion

The history tells the story of when laborers felt that they were being exploited, so they demanded and attained their rights using different struggles like work withdrawal. However, today's world, the current nature of work (online work) has disadvantaged digital workers and left them with little or no bargaining power (Kaplinsky, 2004; Manning, 2003). In this fast pace change and digitalization era, Ulrich (1996) argument does not seem far-fetched that agility is more important than accuracy. Ulrich and his colleagues (see (Ulrich et al., 1989; Ulrich et al., 1995) argue the importance of HR professionals being change agents. In this technological era, the role of a change agent thrives on the fact that businesses today operate in fast-changing environments.

Consequently, it emphasized HR personnel develop a changing culture (Bell et al., 2006a). HR professionals must "build a shared urgency for change, involve and motivate key stakeholders, share the significance of the change, and promote needed change to ensure measured success" (Lawson & Limbrick, 1996). HR professionals' ability to see the future requires learning about initiatives (Svoboda & Schröder, 2001).

Ulrich et al. (1995) highlights "in a world of high amounts of change, reducing risk means acting without full answers but having the capacity to adjust mid-stream,"; implying the need for an agile working approach for HR. Moreover, Hempel (2004) highlights the technological change demand "HR must become a champion of management processes that encourage innovation and creativity". HR can act as a strategic business partner, which would give it credibility in its work. It will also help the organization build a reputation as a good employer. It ultimately supports hiring skilled employees. Harris and Krueger (2015) discussed that digital workers' or freelancers' contractual services are different from conventional work. Thus, researchers and HR practitioners should define an independent definition of online freelance and standard operating procedures (SOPs) to ensure fair treatment, market competitive service payment, and protection against exploitation. HR professionals can perform their role as employee advocates to ensure proper treatment.

Because technology has changed the way HR traditionally performs activities (Al-Mutawa & Manuel, 2022; Bell et al., 2006a; Kuchciak & Warwas, 2021), digital tools allow them to collect and analyze data make strategic decisions (Lawler & Mohrman, 2003). Technological advancement and innovation require organizations to adopt change quickly because the Internet of things (IoT) phenomena in almost everything provides data or control through being connected to the Internet (Ebersold & Glass, 2015). It highlights that HR professionals need to move beyond the administrative skills toward achieving excellence as a strategic business partnership, change management, technology, and employee advocate (Bell et al., 2006b) to face employee and employer relations challenges and issues.

The digital workers cannot build any movement to negotiate for their rights. It is not only because of geographic boundaries, but work withdrawal also does not affect the employer. They can always find new digital labor. The online digital platform has been designed as a market where all digital workers have to compete with each other (Graham et al., 2017). Thus, HR needs to step up to protect the digital worker and perform its role as an employee advocate.

Hence, future studies using TAM should try to see HR behavior and intention whether they can see it. The HR professionals cannot manage the change in employment relations unless they start examining their role own role. When the relationship is short-term, HR should try to develop ideas to support the gig workers. They would not be able to do so unless HR accepts the change technological innovation has brought to their doors. Consequently, HR professionals working for a business that utilizes digital labor might learn from Australia's experience, when faced with a threat by Unions NSW Australia, which represents approximately 600,000 union members, to take legal action over Airtasker's establishment minimum pay guidelines (Minter, 2017)So, a worker could be protected against the competition in the market. HR should act as an employee advocate and formulate policy and procedures to protect employees from exploitation. Secondly, intermediation (digital platform) can be formally categorized as "labor hire," so it can come under the regulation agencies (Stewart & Stanford, 2017) to protect freelancers.

For instance, the Commission (2015) has suggested 'sham contracting' in light of the Fair Work Act to protect the worker. In the aftermath of recent digitization, the literature has established that human resource professionals (Bell et al., 2006b; Lawler & Mohrman, 2003) must obtain technological skills (Lawler & Mohrman, 2003). This expertise assists an HR professional in understanding the business and developing business strategies while supporting the employee. It reflects that HR managers need technological knowledge as part of their competencies. Moreover, 'digital awareness' is also significant competency HR professionals require. Moreover, to achieve the above competencies and perform the role of employee advocate and business partner, Ulrich (1996) an HR professional will need to act as a change agent to develop readiness for change (Bell et al., 2006a). Therefore, it can perform its role both effectively and efficiently.

Conclusion

Digitalization and technological advancement have transformed the way organizations perform their daily task. It has evolved the organizational structure and the employment relationship between employee and employer. The organizations are now more project-oriented; employers and individuals can exchange their services here. This revolution has opened the

doors of opportunity and reduced the bargaining power of digital workers. Employers have started to exploit individuals due to a lack of laws and policies. This called for HR professionals to start playing their role as employee advocates in project-based organizations. It stressed that HR professionals need to enhance their technological competencies according to market demands and formulate policies and strategies to assist the digital worker. HR professionals need to revise the current employment definition and enforce laws and regulations to protect gig workers' rights, so the online or digital outsourcing platforms cannot exploit them.

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